

## Ash Wednesday

In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis observes that the practice of repentance can be tricky business. He argues that only someone who has some sense of what it means to be good can understand what it means to be bad; the person who has no sense of what it means to be good will have no sense of what it means to be bad. Indeed, a person who has no sense of what it means to be good will think that bad is good.

Lewis suggests that this is one of the things that makes real repentance difficult for us. We very much want to believe that we are good people, and we tend to resist the idea that we are bad. When we are confronted by our need for repentance, as we are today, it reminds us that we are not as good as we would like to think that we are. And we don't appreciate hearing that.

So it takes a good person to repent, says Lewis; it takes someone who not only has a clear sense *that* they should repent, but also has a clear sense of *why* they should repent. And that's the problem: only a good person can repent truly, but a truly good person won't need to repent because they're already good. The one who needs to repent—the bad person—is the one who can't repent, because they don't even recognize their need for repentance. “The worse you are,” said Lewis, “the more you need it,” but the less you know it “and the less you can do it.”

Now, this is not just a logical puzzle for Lewis; this is a spiritual problem. And in many ways I think Lewis has put his finger on the problem or the question that is at the heart of the observance of a holy Lent: how can we truly begin to practice the kind of repentance to which the season of Lent calls us?

Of course, C.S. Lewis isn't the only one to have observed that the exercise of true repentance can be tricky business. In our reading from the gospel of Matthew, Jesus himself makes much the same observation. The things that Jesus has to say about practicing one's piety

points us in much the same direction that Lewis indicates. In fact, Jesus takes us even farther than Lewis does because Jesus shows us that even when we are in midst of practicing our repentance we can fall into the trap of thinking that we're pretty good people; even the occasion for confession can be an opportunity for spiritual pride.

Well, this leaves us in quite a fix: we are called to repentance, but find that it is practically impossible for us to repent in a manner that is not tainted by our own self-serving tendencies. We find ourselves not far from the place where St. Paul found himself when he reflected on his inability to keep the law of God: in his letter to the Romans, he wrote, "I know that nothing good dwells within me ... I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good that I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ... I find it to be a law that when I want to do good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

So it sounds like we're stuck, doesn't it? Lewis and Paul and Jesus all seem to be saying that even when we want to do our best, even when we want to admit that we don't always do our best, despite our strongest efforts and our good intentions, we're not able to be the people we would like to be and we know that we should be.

This is precisely where the observance of a holy Lent begins: with an awareness of our poverty. We cannot rest in the assurance of our own righteousness, because we are not righteous people. We cannot rest even in our repentance, because even our acts of repentance can become occasions for self-righteousness.

There is both a shorter version and a slightly longer version of the answer to this

problem. Let me start with the shorter version. We find it impossible to be truly good people: do good anyways. We find it impossible to practice true repentance: repent anyways. Yes, there will always be an element of hypocrisy to everything that we do, but don't worry about it. When we continually strive to do good in the face of our inability to do so, when we strive to repent despite our inability to do so with pure motives, we bear witness to the fact that it is God who saves us, and not we ourselves. There's the short answer.

Now, that answer may get us started, but it's not really very satisfying, so we need the slightly longer version of the answer to this problem. And this slightly longer answer begins and ends with the person of Jesus. Jesus is the one who shows us what true goodness looks like, Jesus is the one who shows us what real repentance looks like, and Jesus is the one that helps us overcome our inability to do what we know is right and to offer the kind of repentance to which we are called.

First, Jesus is the one who shows us what true goodness looks like. Jesus did a lot of good things, even really great things: he fed hungry people, he cured sick people, he taught people about the kingdom of God. Ultimately, Jesus even gave his life for the sake of the gospel. But it wasn't any of these things in and of themselves that made Jesus good.

Remember the words Jesus spoke to the one who called him the "good teacher"? "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." There's something here that gives us a clue to understanding the goodness of Jesus: what makes Jesus the one who shows us what true goodness looks like is the fact that he did not consider his life his own. His life was ordered around the will of his Father, and his life was dedicated to the proclamation of the gospel in both word and deed. In other words, what Jesus shows us is that a good person is someone who seeks first, not their own well-being or their own prerogative, but seeks first the kingdom of God.

Being a good person means giving up your life so that you can find true life.

Second, Jesus is the one who shows us what real repentance looks like. This one may sound a little funny, because we're used to thinking of Jesus as having been such a good person that he didn't need to repent. And yet, the biblical witness is clear: one of the gifts Jesus gives to us is that he shows us what real repentance looks like.

Remember the story of the baptism of Jesus, how when Jesus came to John at the Jordan River John tried to prevent him from being baptized? And yet, Jesus tells John that his act of repentance is part of the fulfillment of God's purpose. The author of the epistle to the Hebrews picks up on this same theme when he writes that Jesus had to become like us in every respect, even in our need for repentance, so that he might be able to serve as our high priest. In his humility, in his identification with us even in our need for redemption, Jesus shows us what real repentance looks like.

And finally, Jesus is the one who helps us overcome our inability to do what we know is right and to offer the kind of repentance to which we are called. What we find as we follow the path of faith is that the further we go, the more dependent on Jesus we are; if we don't find that to be the case, then we'd better ask ourselves if we're on the right path. There's never a point at which we can stop leaning on Jesus or when we stop depending on his grace to bear us up.

St. Paul talked about this quite a bit. In his letter to the Romans, he wrote that being a disciple of Jesus means far more than trying to follow the example of Jesus: being a disciple of Jesus means being joined to him in his death. "Do you not know," he wrote, "that those of us who have been baptized" have been joined to Christ in his death? For all intents and purposes, Paul says, we are dead. But because we have died with him, so also can we now live with him. In his letter to the Galatians, he wrote, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me, and

the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and who gave his life for me.” It is the power of God at work in us that enables us to be good people and to practice true repentance.

So that’s the longer answer. And what all of this means is that fundamentally Lent is nothing other than an invitation to draw closer to Jesus, to learn how to depend on him more than we have in the past so that we can practice more of the goodness he gives to us and so that we can observe the kind of repentance to which he calls us. Lent is an opportunity to live out the words of St. Francis, who recognized that it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

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